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Statement submitted by Human Rights Sanrakshan Sansthaa, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Women — the half of the world's population — play an important role along with men in creating a better life for families. The status of women in a society is the true index of its cultural, social, religious and spiritual levels. It is one of the most important criteria for estimating with precision the degree of civilization attained by a particular society. As women become empowered they become change agents who influence decisions and actions, which effect organisations, institutions and communities.

But after six and half decades of our independence, there is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors — economic, social, political education, healthcare, nutrition and legal. As women are oppressed in all spheres of life, they need to be empowered in all walks of life. The increasing level of gang-rapes in society has raised a new question of male-domination and cruelty with women and the girl child.

The Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has emphasized, "Indeed the empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today."

Actually, empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources and over ideology (Sen & Batliwala, 2000). The process of empowerment involves not only changes in access to resources, but also an understanding of one's rights and entitlements and the concretisation that "gender roles can be changed and gender equality is possible" (The Centre for Development and Population Activities, 1996).

Women's position and degree of empowerment is defined by gender and gender relations in society. Gender represents not just the biological sex of an individual, but also the different roles, rights, and obligations that are attached by society to individuals born with male or female sex characteristics. Although, sex differentiated roles, rights, and obligations vary by class and lifecycle stage, they exist in the very sphere of human functioning (domestic, communal, labour market, religious, etc.). This makes gender a fundamental dimension of societal stratification. Moreover, the sex-specific roles, rights and obligations are not just different, they also tend to be unequal. In almost every sphere of human functioning, the roles defined for women are subordinated to those defined for men. The rights for women and the obligations women have, are more limiting than those of men. Unequal gender relations imply that men not only have and can exercise greater power than women in almost all spheres of functioning, they also have culturally and often legally sanctioned power over women and have greater control of and access to resource and information. This inequality in gender relations is embodied in various societal institutions, but is reproduced daily in the household.

Thus, empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities. It is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. The process of empowerment involves not only changes in access to resources, but also an understanding of one's rights and entitlements.

Kishor (2000) argues that capturing the empowerment process with cross-sectional data needs not only indicators that evaluate the end-product of the process (i.e., indicators that measure evidence of empowerment), but also indicators for women's access to different sources of empowerment and of women's location within an appropriate setting for empowerment. Together the indicators of evidence, sources, and setting provide a snapshot of both the success of the process of empowerment as well as the hurdles that exist.

The National Family Health Survey (1998-99) also throws light on various indicators of women's empowerment. Few indicators are (i) Women's Participation in Household Decision, (ii) Women's Freedom of Movement, (iii) Women's Acceptance of Unequal Gender Roles, (iv) Gender Preferences for Children, (v) Educational Preferences According to Sex of Child. These indicators of women's empowerment in India shows that "conscientization" with regard to gender equality is low among women, son preference remains high and women's control over household decisions, even decisions about their own health, remains extremely limited.

Identity is one of those concepts in psychology that people are able to grasp intuitively but find very difficult to define. Erikson's (1968) notion of identity emphasizes the importance of an autonomous sense of self, a private version of traits and characteristics that set one apart from all others. It is also important to view one's "self" as a continuous phenomenon. One's sense of self does not undergo radical alterations with changes in group membership or with age (Hopkins, 1983).

It has been observed by Hopkins that the crisis like period for clarifying one's identity, the period of heightened vulnerability and sensitivity, occurs during adolescence or early adulthood. The most positive outcome of the crisis is an optimal sense of identity experienced as psycho-social well-being. Identity achievement, experienced as psycho-social well-being is a result of an examination of alternatives available, followed by commitment to one alternative within the range of the possible. Erikson wrote that "without some such ideological commitment, however implicit in a 'way of life', youth suffers a confusion of values (Erikson, 1968). He has further asserted that in psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is, likely, and necessarily for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and other circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated "identity consciousness" (Erikson, 1974).

In the Eriksonian ego-psychology perspective, identity consists of several inter related elements (Bourne, 1978). Identity can be viewed as a development outcome of early-childhood experiences, as a summary of adaptive accomplishments, and as a structural configuration of personality. And above all else, identity is thought to be a dynamic process of testing, selecting and integrating self-images and personal ideologies. However, it is thought that to arrive a wholesome and integrated sense of identity during adolescence, one must experience a "crisis". Both Erikson (1968) and Allport (1964) have attempted to describe what is meant by crisis in normal development. According to Allport, "a crisis is a situation of emotional and mental stress requiring significant alterations of outlook within a short period of time.

These alterations of outlook frequently involve changes in the structure of personality". Erikson characterizes this experience as a feeling of suspended animation, preceding events are irrelevant to what is to come. The individual is facing a multitude of decisions on vocational choice and training, marriage and ideology and comes to feel increasingly uneasy, anxious, compelled to resolve the tension.

Erikson's ideas on adolescence have generated considerable research on identity formation in recent years. The leader in this field is James Marcia (1966, 1967, 1970), a psychologist at the State University of New York at Buffalo who has made a major contribution to our understanding through his research on identity status (Dacey, 1979).

Marcia also looked at the relationship between identity and intimacy. Both previous and current identity status were associated with the successful achievement of an intimate relationship. The subjects who has achieved identity also experienced intimacy. Those who had changed to a foreclosed or diffused status had stereotyped relationships or were experiencing isolation. In other words, work on identity continued to play a part in the young adults' ability to participate in a mutually satisfying personal relationship (Newman, & Newman, 1979).

The present study is an attempt to understand and analyse the women empowerment and identity statuses through psychosocial orientation. The psychosocial orientation has been the hallmark of the latter half of the twentieth century and is more clearly visible in the studies with regard to the process of formation of identity. The empowerment and identity of women both are the most attention seeking and debating phenomena before the present global society and no society can be said civilized and cultured if their half population are left ignored. This vehemently justifies the need to make an objective study of empowerment and identity statuses of the women.